



The Fragmented Hero in the Deconstructed Arabic Novel: *Layl Tanja*, *‘Ashiqāt al-Nadhil*, and *Sayyidat al-Maqām* as Models

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of the disintegration of the hero's character in the deconstructed Arabic novel, drawing on three novels as analytical models: Sayyidat al-Maqām (Lady of the Maqam) by Waciny Al-A'raj, (Laredj), ‘Ashiqāt al Nadhil (The Villain's Mistresses) by al Tahir al-Riyāhī, and Layl Tanja (Tangier Night) by Muhammad Ahjiouj. The article proposes a theoretical framework that distinguishes between deconstruction as a philosophical, critical method rooted in Derrida and structural, stylistic disintegration as an expressive tool reflecting the condition of fragmentation lived by the writer and his society; the study adopts the latter approach. It also traces the evolution of the anti-hero concept in both Western and Arabic literature across the phases of modernity and postmodernity. The applied reading reveals that the central characters in all three novels embody the pattern of the fragmented anti-hero, sharing traits such as the absence of a name and identity, social and intellectual paralysis, the inability to achieve selfhood, and surrender to overwhelming forces. The article concludes that this pattern is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a profound reflection of the crisis of Arab humanity in confronting political despotism and the disintegration of collective identity within a fragmented postmodern context.

The Modern Novel and the Postmodern Novel

A great number of studies and research have addressed the modern novel — its emergence, characteristics, and constituent elements, from the early decades of the last century to the

present day. This has rendered the concept of modernity temporally ambiguous rather than clearly defined, as each scholar or researcher has situated modernity within the era in which their study was conducted.

The matter is the same with regard to the contemporary novel, and we rarely find studies or research that put the radical differences between the modern and contemporary novel under the microscope, or highlight them in a clear, successive and logical manner.¹

The "Modern Novel" emerged in the late nineteenth century (1890–1900) and was the product of an era in which humanity sought an outlet and a solution for the conflict it was living and the crisis that surrounded and confined it, the crisis of the fin de siècle. The modern novel became the platform through which people of that time expressed their problems, conflicts, and social and psychological disturbances. In the service of this purpose, the modern novel raised specific issues and themes, such as social anxiety and the disintegration of societies, which necessarily led to economic and psychological upheavals. The psychological depth of its characters thus distinguished the modern novel; its central concern was the characters' feelings and the conflicts they lived through, with the remaining structural and stylistic narrative elements serving in support. This novel was anchored in content rather than form: the plot was presented clearly and logically, meaning that writers relied on traditional sequential, interlinked narration to present the issue/plot in a clear and comprehensible manner, and the reader expended no effort in the act of reading but merely observed the social and psychological conflict of the characters at that moment.

In contrast, the "Nouveau Roman/ New Novel"² (Postmodern Novel) crystallized and spread from France in the 1950s and, in its clearest and most explicit sense, is a rebellion against the modern novel in both form and content. The New Novel moves away from the traditional plot and continuous logical sequential narration; in its place, it relies on playing with language and form, presenting scenes as they

occurred in reality without rearrangement, and also focuses on sensory details that push the characters aside to become the protagonist themselves, so that characters are presented to the reader through these details as if they were the foundation of the narrative work. In other words, this novel may appear unconnected to the work's characters and instead bound to things and objects, what might be called "material elements", resulting in a dense and precise descriptive style. In the New Novel, the reader plays an essential role in the process of analysis: the writer does not so much declare the feelings and emotions of the characters as much as he describes the material elements surrounding them, creating a space for the reader to engage in analysis, interpretation, and immersion in the sensory experience of the material world presented. The point of similarity between the Modern Novel and the New Novel is the description of reality as it is, in a context that gives humanity the right to express the meaning of its existence. The New Novel has been given various names, including: Postmodern Novel, the Un-Novel, the Counter-Novel, the Modern Novel, the Experimental Novel, and the Avant-Garde Novel.³ It has also been called the "Anti-Novel" by some⁴.

The Western-Arabic Concept of Disintegration

Between Interpretive Deconstruction and Structural, Stylistic Disintegration

"Deconstruction" is a philosophical and critical method established by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) in the 1960s. This method relies on dismantling the textual structure to reveal implicit relationships among the elements of a literary work and to demonstrate the multiplicity of interpretations of a single text. Structural and stylistic disintegration, by contrast, refers to the narrative style employed in the writing of literary works to express the condition of

¹ Būrās, 2011, pp. 9–10.

² The word 'Nouveau' in French means 'New.' See: Britton, Celia. 1992.

³ Grillet, 1985, p. 9.

⁴ Gros, 1970, pp. 433–434.

fragmentation and chaos lived by the writer and his society; this style manifests in breaking traditional narrative molds such as linear plot, sequential linear time, and the unity of narrative voice, and these deconstructed texts reflect complex artistic and real-life experiences.

Deconstruction, for the philosopher and literary critic Jacques Derrida, constitutes a strategy for analyzing literary works: deconstruction views the text as an opaque mass that must be exploded from within to reveal its essence hidden at its core,⁵ yet deconstruction does not mean corrupting the system or the text as a whole; rather, it allows for the reorganization and reassembly of its elements.⁶ Deconstruction, therefore, does not limit itself to analyzing the text at the surface level alone. Still, it seeks to dismantle the internal structure, subvert the stable, fixed landmarks, and reshape the text intellectually, thereby revealing obscure or contradictory meanings often concealed. Derrida notes that deconstruction was not originally a theory or a method, but became such after institutions and scholars adopted it across diverse fields: history, politics, languages, music, art criticism, and others⁷. For Derrida, deconstruction is a term not confined to a single use or to one field over others⁸ but is useful across all disciplines.

Deconstruction is contrasted with the structural method⁹, one of the critical approaches that emerged in the twentieth century. This method — unlike deconstruction — rests on analyzing literary texts as a single, interrelated whole, analyzed from within, beginning with the word and proceeding through the structural elements until the researcher or literary scholar arrives at a single, stable interpretation.

Our classification of the deconstructive method and structural, stylistic disintegration, and the

highlighting of the distinction between them, serves to emphasize that our present study is not concerned with the deconstructionist school, nor with the analysis of novels according to the approach of dismantling textual structure to reveal hidden implicit relationships between the elements of a literary work; neither do we adopt the structural approach. Rather, we seek to study the levels of disintegration in each of the selected novels, and to shed light on the deconstructed structural and stylistic aspects and the elements and techniques that fall within their scope: we speak of a character that we see as fragmented and volatile, and a disintegrated narrative with overlapping dialogues, and consequently spaces that we also see as ambiguous and fragmented.

Disintegration in Western Literature — In the Era of Modernity and Postmodernity

The concept of disintegration in Western literature is an artistic, cultural, and literary response to the transformations witnessed in the twentieth century, including the First and Second World Wars and the emergence of existentialist philosophies. Disintegration appeared in Western literature as a current aimed at breaking traditional narrative molds, shattering the linear timeline, and fracturing coherent plots that present events in a clear, sequential order. This current revolves around exploring the human self and articulating its contents in random, chaotic contexts, presenting it to the reader as laden with uncertainty, doubt, and loss — the condition of every human being in the age of modernity and beyond¹⁰.

Disintegration appeared in the era of modernity (late nineteenth century to mid twentieth century) in an early form in the works of William Faulkner (1897–1962), James Joyce (1882–1941), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), who employed techniques such as stream of

⁵ Sec: 'Atiyya, 2010, p. 8.

⁶ Derrida, Jacques, 1996, p. 141.

⁷ Zhai, 2015, p. 2.

⁸ Sikirivwa, 2020, p. 46.

⁹ Sec: Fu'ad, Mafaz. 2016.

¹⁰ On modernity and postmodernity, see Muhammadi (2021).

consciousness¹¹ multiple narrative voices, and the interweaving of timeframes. In postmodernity¹² (mid-twentieth century to the present), the concept of disintegration evolved to become a tool for critiquing intellectual and cultural constants, as seen in the novels of Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937). Italo Calvino (1923–1985), where the internal structure of texts disintegrated, leaving the reader to confront fragmented, fractured texts that demand their inevitable intervention to understand events and meanings.

Disintegration in the modern era, then, is a means of seeking the essence of human experience amidst a turbulent world, through a focus on the inner self and subjective experience; in postmodernity, however, disintegration became a mirror reflecting reality: the text fragments in narration and structure, becoming a transparent, exposing reflection of lived experience. Accordingly, the reader finds themselves implicated in gathering and crystallizing the fractured events and contents to grasp the meanings of the deconstructed literary work, making the reader an essential part of the narrative game, since the completion of the text is contingent upon their participation in reconstructing, ordering, and connecting events.

From this, we find that the structural and stylistic disintegration of Western literary works emerged in the era of modernity (early twentieth century) but was then deliberate and purposeful — serving to achieve the writer's view of a chaotic, turbulent reality, functioning as a means of expressing that reality. In postmodernity, however, disintegration became an existential condition of the writer themselves: the writer was no longer certain or capable of presenting their vision of reality in a

clear, coherent form, and thus succeeded in presenting their reality marked by disorder only by projecting their views and ideas exactly as they were: scattered, defeated, fractured.

Disintegration in Arabic Literature — In the Era of Modernity and Postmodernity

The beginnings of literary modernity in the Arab world appeared in the 1940s, after the Second World War, influenced by political and social changes, including colonialism, independence, and nationalist movements. In this historical phase, experimentalism¹³ appeared in literature while traditional forms were preserved. In the 1960s, literary works emerged that broke with traditional forms under Western influence; stream of consciousness and multiple voices were foregrounded, and national identity and individual selfhood were spotlighted. The postmodern era began in the Arab world in the 1970s as a result of major political and social transformations, especially national military defeats, most notably the June 1967 War (Naksa), after which literary works appeared that rebelled against linear time and the coherent plot and critiqued major institutions such as religion and the state.

The concept of disintegration in Arabic literature emerged gradually as a result of social, political, and cultural changes in the Arab world since the mid, twentieth century; Arab writers were influenced by concepts of Western modernity and employed them in their literature in ways suited to their own particular environments, producing novels that challenge traditional narrative molds and reflect the upheavals suffered by Arab humanity under political transformations that played the greatest role in the loss of Arab identity. The

¹¹ Stream of consciousness is considered a literary expression of solipsism, which denies the existence of any external reality and holds that the ego alone exists and that thought leaves only its representations. See: Zaytouni, 2002. The term stream of consciousness is used to denote a method of presenting a character's mental processes in literature. See: Humphrey, 1962. Also: Khalil, 2011.

¹² The most important factors that led to the emergence of the postmodern era in literature were the consequences of the Second World War and the emergence of new philosophical schools, such as Derrida's deconstruction and technological advancement. See: McHale, 2003.

¹³ By experimentalism is meant the invention of a new literary approach that transcends the traditional approach followed. See: Bū'alshī'r, Zuhayra. 2020.

works of Edwar al-Kharrat (1926–2015), Jamal al-Ghitani (1945–2015), and Abdel Rahman Munif (1933–2004) emerged as models of Arabic novels that adopt deconstructed narrative structures, in which boundaries between time and space dissolve, and the greatest emphasis is placed on introspection of the self. In the 1970s, the postmodern Arabic novel reflected the fragmentation of Arab identity and the fracturing of consciousness, thought, and self, becoming an extension of Western deconstructed novels while maintaining its Arabic background and its consequences. Among these novels are works by Hoda Barakat (b. 1952), Waciny Laredj (b. 1954), Taysir Sboul (1939–1973), and Mu'nis al-Razzaz (1951–2002).

Disintegration in both Western and Arabic literature embodies a redefinition of the narrative function, wherein the text does not aim to offer a comprehensive or coherent vision of the world, but to explore individual and collective uncertainty within a temporally and culturally layered context.

The Emergence of the Term 'Deconstructed Novel'

The term 'deconstructed novel' was not used to denote a distinct literary genre for novels that adopted a deconstructed narrative; rather, it appeared later in the field of novel criticism to designate works distinguished by fragmented narration. Its primary use was to classify novelistic works that required the reader's intervention to reconstruct the text and to attempt to extrapolate from their presented contents — works distinguished by the disintegration of time, plot, and narrative voices, which appeared in the contexts of modernity and postmodernity. Several designations were given to these novels before the emergence of the term 'deconstructed novel', designations that remain in use today, among them: the Non-Novel, the Counter

Novel, the Experimental Novel, the Avant, Garde Novel¹⁴, and what some have called the 'Anti, Novel'¹⁵.

Before the emergence of the term 'deconstructed novel', these novels were classified in Western modernist criticism within the framework of Experimental Novels, Modern Novels, or Nonlinear Novels, terms or designations adopted to study and critique novels that sought to break with traditional forms; fragmentation and disintegration were mentioned as a stylistic description only and not as a complete, distinct literary genre with its own stylistic and content, based characteristics. In postmodern criticism, with the development of postmodern theory and from the mid, twentieth century (1950s to 1970s), critics turned to using clearer terminology to describe the structural disintegration that had by then affected novels, such as: Fragmented Novels, Narrative Disintegration, and, with the rise of Derrida's theories of Deconstruction¹⁶, the idea of structural disintegration became fundamental and central to the analysis of this type of literature. It may be said that the use of the term 'deconstructed novel' in Western criticism dates to the 1960s and 1970s, while its adoption as a critical term was established in the late 1970s and 1980s.

In Arabic literature, the term 'deconstructed novel' appeared later; we find critics using it in the 1980s and 1990s, influenced by developments in Western criticism and by the development of the Arabic novel in a complex social and cultural context that reflects the fragmentation of Arab identity and society.

Arab critics such as Ghali Shukri, Faysal Darraj, Sabri Hafiz, and Abdallah Ibrahim referred to deconstructed novels as 'non-plot', 'experimental', or 'polyphonic'. What contributed to the delay in the emergence of the term 'deconstructed novel' was the overlapping

¹⁴ Grillet, 1985, p. 9.

¹⁵ Gros, 1970, pp. 433–434.

¹⁶ Deconstruction is a philosophical and critical method developed by the French philosopher and writer Jacques

Derrida in the 1960s; it is a reading strategy that treats the literary text as an opaque mass that must be deconstructed to reveal its essence. See: Derrida, 1967.

of terms denoting the breaking of linear time and the diversity of styles used to deconstruct structure and content. This complexity made it difficult to identify, unify, and adopt a single agreed-upon term.

In sum, 'the deconstructed novel' is a critical term that emerged in Western literature in the 1960s and later in Arabic literature in the 1980s. It refers to novels built on narrative fragmentation across all their structural and stylistic components. Although this term appeared in modern novels, it underwent evolution in postmodern novels: shifting from expressing deep meaning amidst chaos to a belief that chaos is essential and needs no meaning; from expressing a personal temporal experience to considering time and plot an absurdist game; from a concern with understanding the self to a focus on critiquing major systems; and from preoccupation with the self to a focus on the loss of self and the loss of meaning.

The Hero in the Deconstructed Novel

The figure of the hero constitutes a problematic focal point in narrative studies; its significance does not lie merely in driving the narrative and building the plot, but also in questioning the very concept of heroism, its criteria, and its historical and aesthetic transformations. The modern novel no longer regards the hero as a complete model or a superior self, but rather as a problematic narrative entity whose features are shaped through a network of actions, desires, and failures, and whose centrality is measured by the extent to which they generate meaning, far removed from the ready-made moral or symbolic attributes to which we were accustomed in classical literature.

The hero is considered 'the active and dynamic element within the novelistic text as the essential element among the characters; it is the character through which events can be controlled and directed. It therefore cannot be dispensed with as an essential character

around whom all the events of the novel revolve and who strives to attain its subject.'¹⁷ For us to be able to define the type of the central character, and to designate it as the hero of the novelistic work, we must trace its steps and then 'define the goal that it strives to achieve throughout the text... After defining the goal, methodological mechanisms are necessary to guide the reader through the central character's role in defining this goal, shaping it, formulating it in final form, and then executing it and reaching a result. Only then can the reader define the central character's type in the text and determine their position in relation to the concept of heroism. These methodological mechanisms may be condensed into five as follows: the incentive, desire, ability, execution, and result. If the central character fully and without reduction achieves its goal, that character is a hero in the sense of modern literary studies, regardless of the goal's nature, whether negative or positive. If it fails in this, it is an Anti-hero; and if its success is partial and incomplete, it becomes a Semi-hero¹⁸ or a hero-like figure.

The idea of heroism, in its narrative origins, is bound to the epic model: the hero is a figure endowed with strength, lineage, skill, and courage in facing destiny; this model then evolves into a more realistic form in the classical novel, reflecting the model of the active human being within his society. But the modern and postmodern transformation led to the emergence of new models of heroes that embody marginalization, passivity, ambiguity, and indifference. The hero represents, superficially, a character (a center, around whom secondary characters revolve, illuminating and illuminated by him, producing together a novelistic act that redefines all the characters; within these limits, the hero appears to be) an organized character who decides for himself and for others, as if he were a father who monopolizes speech and denies it to others.¹⁹ He is also "the character

¹⁷ Lamshnaq, Labīd, 2023, p. 31.

¹⁸ Taha, 1998, pp. 306–308.

¹⁹ See: Darrāj, 2013.

who receives the greatest emotional weight, and who is the character that arouses the reader's sympathy, empathy, joy, and sorrow."²⁰ The hero in literature is "the master of the narrative game, and also the character that gives the event its dynamism and is called the active force."²¹ Furthermore, "the hero's character continually drives the narrative process, and its action may be positive or its opposite."²²

"The hero's positioning in the world is contingent upon an opening tinged with a kind of myth or chance, and his readiness manifests in those distinguishing qualifications such as fame, grandeur, and power, and the enthusiasm of victory, courage, and intelligence. These are spiritual qualifications to which physical ones approaching perfection are added: weight, stature, and appearance, along with certain physical and psychological conditions without any impediment. This idealistic vision of the hero does not exist in the age of the modern novel, where characters are neither extraordinary nor mythical beings, but persons directed by experience in the world."²³ Having the major transformations of the age of modernity and after, the concept of the hero and his role in the literary work evolved from the knight or the god to the ordinary, marginalized person. "Our grandmothers' tales accustomed us to imagining the hero as a daring knight, muscular, who traverses the wastelands and exposes himself to dangers to save his beloved [...] As for the epics, they were not sparing in depicting heroes in extraordinary guises, for they were either gods, demigods, or nobles endowed with all the attributes of perfection [...] The situation was overturned in the modern era, as the focus of attention shifted from the extraordinary to the everyday, from the complete to the deformed, from heroism to anti-heroism, so that narration

expressed the condition of humanity in a problematic world in which values and ideals had disappeared, injustice and vulgarity prevailed, and the human being had become objectified."²⁴

Thus, the hero became a mirror of the alienation and disintegration of contemporary humanity: the human being grew estranged in his homeland and isolated in his society, and consequently, the character of the hero in literary works was compelled to reveal the truth of this human being and the reality of his solitude, isolation, brokenness, and dispersal. Instead of working in the service of his people and his society, the hero was no longer even capable of achieving his own self or his simple individual ambitions. After the great values had vanished, the foundations of society had disintegrated, and the human-self had been scattered, the modern hero defines his own goal of finding his identity free from social constraints and traditions. He struggles to fulfill his personal desires rather than conform to the demands of society and its institutions. In failing to achieve this, he is considered a failure from society's point of view."²⁵ Thus, the modern hero became "the ordinary man"²⁶ who lacks "greatness, elegance, power, and social success."²⁷ This conception of the hero is considered a response to "the intellectual, moral, and cultural sensibility associated with modernity. The changing society and the shifting cultural climate led to changes in models of heroism. The traditional literary genres such as classical epics, tragedies, and romance novels were no longer suitable for presenting exceptional heroism,"²⁸ and the writers of modernity therefore entrusted the alienated, isolated, scattered hero with articulating the existential predicaments suffered by the human being of modernity and after — the result of "urbanization, commerce,

²⁰ Būṭīb, 1999, p. 71.

²¹ Al, Khafaji, 2003, p. 386.

²² Zahaf, 2016, p. 48.

²³ Bellaz, 2010, p. 245.

²⁴ Al-Sakūṭī, 2017, p. 96.

²⁵ Golban, 2015, p. 25.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 76.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 77.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 76.

industrialization, and mass culture alongside the Great War"²⁹ and the wars and intellectual, social, and humanitarian tragedies that followed.

Muhammad Ayyub distinguishes various patterns in the hero's character, based on the hero's role and intellectual and artistic transformations in the literary work. He does not limit himself to the classical model of the positive hero, but broadens his perspective to encompass the many complex characters that play the role of the hero. Among these patterns are: "the absent hero, the alienated hero, the positive hero, the negative/marginal hero, the indifferent hero, the anti, hero, the failed hero, and the oppressed hero...."³⁰ Bringing these patterns into the analysis of a literary work enriches the meanings of that work, revealing to the reader the tension at play in the life of the individual; through them the images of traditional heroism appear in contrast to the modern, nourished by failure, hesitation, and fragility.

Despite the multiplicity of hero patterns in modern literature, this research will focus specifically on the character of the anti-hero, as it represents the clearest and most expressive embodiment of the features of the deconstructed novel, and because the remaining patterns, despite their different designations, all intersect in shared characteristics that mirror the condition of the pessimistic, alienated, helpless human being. Added to this, the character of the hero, with all it entails of marginalization, loss of influence, and loss of meaning, represents the essential point of convergence for all the transformations that have affected the structure of the deconstructed novel in the

wake of wars and the fundamental changes that have descended upon society and the individual. "The Great War, the First World War, like the philosophical ideas that were associated with modernity, contributed to the powerful emergence of the anti-hero character in the modern novel, as the mass massacres diminished the value of the human being and made him a helpless puppet in the face of mechanical warfare."³¹ As a result, writers of modernity were forced "to adapt to the scale of destruction and the loss of life on a scale previously unimaginable, alongside the emotional effects of war, grief, and psychological trauma that long outlasted its end. The trauma of the war years and its tragedy contributed greatly to undermining the religious and moral certainties prevailing at the dawn of the twentieth century."³² Meanwhile, "the anti, hero character appeared after the Second World War, and spread primarily in postmodern literature of the twentieth century; the characteristics of the anti, hero character closely resemble the style promoted by postmodern literature,"³³ a style that is fragmented, scattered, and deconstructed, far from causality, governed only by the absurd in its representation of existential human issues, embodying the condition of the postmodern individual, making him isolated and fearful and unheroic. The "disintegrated society, torn apart by wars, clashing values, cultural crises, and the multiple manifestations of modernity, produces its own heroic model: sick heroes, antisocial, introverted, who cannot be saved except in individuality, amidst social and cultural chaos."³⁴

It is worth noting that the concept of the anti, hero is not of recent origin³⁵, but anti, heroic

²⁹ Golban, 2015, p. 77.

³⁰ Ayyüb, 1997, pp. 40–41.

³¹ Neimneh, 2013, p. 77.

³² Tucev, 2021, p. 12.

³³ Li, 2023, p. 280.

³⁴ Neimneh, 2013, p. 78.

³⁵ Murat distinguishes the concept of the anti, hero before and after the twentieth century, noting that the pre, twentieth, century anti, hero was portrayed within specific literary contexts

that sometimes reflected the weakness of the character or the incompleteness of its traditional 'heroism', but did not at that time express a broad cultural or existential crisis; the concept of the anti, hero was not an expression of the rejection of values or a presentation of the crisis of the lost self, but rather part of the structure of traditional narration. He affirms that the twentieth, century anti, hero is considered a direct response to the condition of uncertainty and doubt that afflicted the individual, becoming not merely a representation of the defeated, weak character, but

models can be found "in the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; nevertheless, modern anti-heroism in the early twentieth century is considered a response to the condition of doubt that beset people regarding traditional values, and represents a response to the triviality of humanity in the modern age and its monotonous existence, a characteristic of modernity and the spirit of the era associated with it."³⁶ We thus find the anti-hero figure merging with the prevailing spirit of uncertainty, the absurdism and loss that the modern human being lived; embodied in it is the collapse of absolute faith in reason and logic resulting from the marginalization of constants and the intensification of questions about the meaning of the human self, a clear and transparent reflection of the deconstructed self that mirrors the intellectual and social transformations and the disintegration of the great frames of reference in the age of modernity and after. This led writers of deconstructed novels to replace the typical active and inspiring heroic characters with pale, anxious, and schizophrenic characters who mock society, reality, and even heroism itself.

The anti-hero character plays the leading role in the novel without enjoying the superior physical or moral attributes that the novel usually confers on its hero; the writer deliberately chooses a naive, foolish, or weak character to play the leading role in the novel, to express a particular vision of reality or a specific concept of the world [...] The anti-hero in the literature of the twentieth century appears as a victim of a society with a strange and incomprehensible mechanism; for this reason, he knows nothing but misery and solitude, and nothing is given him but tedium... The New Realism exploited this image to draw attention to the fates of the

unemployed and to illuminate the plight of the poor [...] The model of the anti-hero "permits the presentation of new faces of human life; existential nausea, or revulsion, born of Romantic ennui, is the common factor among these heroes who deserved to fail as a result of their incapacity to realize their existence."³⁷ The hero in the twentieth century thus became "an unheroic hero, a hero distinguished by negative attributes or attributes that arouse admiration."³⁸ He is "a coward, weak, incompetent, or simply unlucky"³⁹, "bound together in him are heightened consciousness and social isolation and paralysis side by side, as well as the glorification of individuality and its erasure at the same time."⁴⁰ His character also came into conflict with traditional concepts of heroism and masculinity."⁴¹ Heroism was no longer in confrontation, dueling, and helping the needy and saving the weak, but "a synonym for death, cowardice, and flight; the hero is nothing but a human being on the margins of reality, where authority, war, and illness combine to amputate his tongue, his body, and even his mind, leaving him a bewildered freak in a world of inverted roles and absent values."⁴²

The hero in the deconstructed novel is therefore an elusive entity, moving between disparate existential states, neither innocent nor guilty, but a being oscillating and moving through an ambiguous, confused world governed by absurdity, strangeness, and uncertainty. His actions appear accordingly: chaotic and without logic, a truthful expression of the existential alienation, the internal psychological fragmentation, and the schism between the self and the world that he suffers. The hero in the deconstructed novel does not evolve as in the traditional novel. Still, he gradually fades, or collapses, or merges into the absurd, as if dissolving in the narrative work,

a symbol of the disintegration of social, human, and intellectual values and a representation of the experience of the contemporary human being in a turbulent world. See: Kadiroglu, 2012.

³⁶ Neimneh, 2013, p. 75.

³⁷ See: Zaytūnī, 2002.

³⁸ See: Prins, 2003.

³⁹ Quinn, 2006, pp. 28–29.

⁴⁰ Eysteinnsson, 1990, pp. 29–30.

⁴¹ Singh, 2x020, p. 842.

⁴² Al, Sukuti, 2017, p. 98.

just as the individual melts in the modern and postmodern eras, without affecting or being affected by it, but wandering amid the noise of life and the absences of meaning.

The Hero in *Sayyidat al, Maqām*

The central character, the university professor, in the novel *Sayyidat al-Maqām* represents a quintessential anti-hero in deconstructed novels. Despite his high culture and prestigious position, his social standing and wide knowledge availed him nothing in resisting the bitter reality Algeria was living; they did not rescue him from his existential fragility and inner brokenness, nor did they grant him the ability to help his beloved Maryam in her perpetual skirmishes with the 'guardians of intentions'. Furthermore, he was unable to protect her from the moment of death or even to delay it. The hero of the novel does not appear in a stereotypical classical guise; rather, he represents a modern hero far removed from achieving accomplishments and offering solutions to the various problems, he is merely a defeated witness to the collapse of the homeland and the collapse of the self, embodying the absurdity of existence, particularly after the political crises that descended upon Algeria. Thus, the university professor presents an incisive model of the pessimistic, alienated person in his homeland, of the person incapable of following and resisting the various crises, reflecting the human being who has lost his identity, searching for a beloved or a homeland to which to belong, yet losing both his beloved and the homeland. Accordingly, the fragmentation of the narrator's consciousness and the dispersal of his identity manifest with intensity when he abandons his passport, the last thing that might connect him to the homeland, as the narrator says when the hero stands at the top of the Têlém Bridge to throw himself off it: "You did not contemplate it for long; you began to ruffle its pages like a green chicken. You

pulled out its first page with your colored photograph, then the second and the third; after that, your passport was like a dull child's school notebook. You rolled it from above; you heard it strike the mud with great force. I have no homeland. My only homeland is inside my heart and the color of your eyes."⁴³

The hero lived in a turbulent political reality, a raging civil war, and a suffocating religious repression, all higher forces that surpassed him and surrounded him from every side. He thus transformed, despite his culture and his capacity to spread awareness and change reality as a university professor, into a weak, anxious, helpless character with no presence, suffering from the absurdity of existence, constantly asking and wondering about the reason for his existence. The hero says before his suicide, exposing his complete surrender to absurdity, to loss, and to the disintegration of self and identity: "What remained in you then? Your love of art? Memory? This frightening cave that weighs upon you, how do you leave it or extract its burdens from this gloom that fills you? Is it hysteria? Is it the nightmare that has continued to fill you since a distant time? What remains in you, you poor thing? Many things that now distance you from your homeland. What homeland, man? You are among the subjects of this country; you have not yet earned the right of citizenship. A stranger in a homeland snatched violently from your eyes. Who are you?"⁴⁴. The hero in this passage clearly links political traumas to the loss of being and meaning, indicating one of the main reasons that led to his existential fragmentation. In another scattered scene, assembled from the novel's distant pages, the hero describes himself as a dinosaur when asked about his identity and why he was wandering through the city streets at a late hour: "Sir, I am very peaceable. A dinosaur that should have gone extinct but has not gone extinct"⁴⁵ and at the end of the novel, he addresses himself from atop the bridge: "I am

⁴³ Al-A'raj (Laredj), 2006, pp. 284–285.

⁴⁴ Al-A'raj, 2006, pp. 283.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 230–231.

thinking now of this dinosaur that has not gone extinct. He must eat himself before the garbage of the guardians of intentions eats him."⁴⁶ These two passages embody the extent of the hero's fragility and reveal his sense of alienation; he feels he belongs to a distant time, and that there is no place for him in this homeland or in this era.

The hero accompanies his beloved Maryam throughout the novel's scenes in her constant resistance to the group of 'guardians of intentions', standing between her and them without intervening, embodying the despairing, miserable citizen who has lost hope and is shattered in his ambitions, who finds in resistance a direct threat to his life and therefore prefers silence and acceptance of reality with all its bitterness. Laredj reinforces the image of the fragmented hero by refraining from granting the novel's hero a name that would identify him: the hero is without a name because he lacks an identity and the capacity to achieve selfhood in a tense, fragmented world. He is presented to us as a 'university professor' bearing no individual attributes, as if the hero of the novel were a model of the educated Arab human being living on the threshold of brokenness, bereft of meaning, imprisoned by fear, fragmented between knowledge and incapacity, capable of real change but submissive. From this, the university professor represents a model of the fragmented hero, the anti-hero: he does not perform heroic acts, does not belong to the discourse of victory, but instead belongs to loss and wandering, to wounded consciousness, and to an existence weighed down by uncertainty.

The Hero in *'Ashiqāt al-Nadhil*

The central character, the journalist Kamal al-Yehyawī, does not possess any qualifications that would make him a traditional hero, and he does not oppose prevailing moral and human values from a place of conscious protest, nor

does he seek to subvert them; rather, he is incapable of producing any coherent value system, as we find him drifting in violating all moralities with savagery and without concern for the consequences. This moral disintegration manifests in various behaviors, foremost among them his repeated betrayals: he betrays his wife and his mistresses, and engages in a sexual relationship with his stepdaughter. These betrayals may be compensation for his sense of deficiency and weakness resulting from his infertility. The deviant behaviors do not stop at sexual deviation; he is also engaged in killing all those who stand against him, at the moment he heard the critical voice challenging his forged works, he moved to silence it by force, not hesitating to "get rid of that wretched critic, forever"⁴⁷ through the hired killer Bukha, because he had published an article criticizing one of his novels. His professional deviation is no less grave than his moral deviation; he turned his profession into an exploitative apparatus, devouring others intellectually and existentially. It becomes clear that he is the university professor who exploits his students' abilities with utter savagery: we discover that he detains some of his outstanding students in a filthy cellar to write the serials that made him a famous writer⁴⁸, making his betrayal twofold, a betrayal of ethics and a betrayal of knowledge, which is considered a liberatory act. Thus, the hero is governed by relationships built on betrayal, deception, and self-interest; accordingly the villainous hero, as the novelist describes him, moves through a world in which good has merged with evil, and all base values have blended to form a hero driven by filthy sadistic ideas, producing a beleaguered self that is nothing but a direct reflection of the disintegration of his consciousness, the fragmentation of his thoughts, beliefs, and principles between treachery, murder, and betrayal, which makes Kamal al-Yehyawī an anti-hero or non-hero.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 285.

⁴⁷ Al-Riyāhī, 2015, pp. 78–79.

⁴⁸ See: Al-Riyāhī, 2015, p. 183.

The hero carries no individual project that he works to achieve; rather, he moves driven by desire, pleasure, and instinctual impulse, led by psychological disorders and suffocating inner solitude. He is a glaring example of the passive, lonely, broken hero who has lost principles and high values; his attitude toward love and marriage reveals his nihilistic vision of human relationships. In his view, "love is promiscuity, beautiful promiscuity"⁴⁹, and he adds, declaring that men in general are all sons of bitches, who cannot offer anything without something, in return⁵⁰ as if generalizing the condition of psychological loss and existential disintegration to all men. These despairing thoughts made him a lonely person, something of which he is aware, as he admits: "I had no one I could trust,"⁵¹ for all his friendships are built on personal interest. His mistress Hind, for example, "was the one who persuaded directors and producers to acquire what he wrote, those miserable serials..."⁵². The same applies to his ex-wife Nadia. Even his friendships were superficial; he was prejudiced toward his friend who sought the hand of his stepdaughter, Sara, because he was Jewish.⁵³

The hero describes his intrinsic solitude and justifies his recourse to the base world: "When I was afraid I would run to my mother; and when I grew up I became sad so I would run to my mother; and when I was uncertain I would run to my mother; and when I wanted to marry I ran to her but she had gone away... as my mother used to do, the beer calmed me little by little."⁵⁴ He adds: "Here I am, as every day, alone like an abandoned stadium. Old voices clamor in my head, and there is no one."⁵⁵ And he adds: "I sat sipping coffee unhurriedly like all the unemployed."⁵⁶ What further intensifies the psychological and existential disintegration of the hero is his ex-wife's revenge after his repeated betrayals; she says: "Every time you

traveled that fat thing came to my bed tired from the excess of betrayals [...] I therefore destroyed his nerves. She deformed me so I deformed her, applying the American method: one pill in the milk in the morning and one in the glass of wine at night. Six full months until I saw the beginning of the results."⁵⁷ Consequently, he had epilepsy⁵⁸, and the outcome of this revenge was his loss between reality and the world of imagination and hallucinations, as his delirium invented the fictional character Hayat, his ideal mistress. Even in the state of delirium, he found in his mistress only a new treacherous beloved who came to him pregnant by another man, like all his mistresses, so that the hallucination itself became an extension of his collapsing moral experience. In this context, the question of meaning floats to the surface after Hayat's disappearance: "Has the justification for my existence also ended?"⁵⁹ Here, the wretched, villainous, treacherous hero acknowledges his loss of meaning, his defeat, and his inclination toward despair and surrender, and his chronic tendency toward nothingness. He says: "I thought a lot about suicide in my adolescence. I was always prepared for it."⁶⁰ It becomes clear that at the end of the novel, he went ahead with suicide, a final step indicating his existential and psychological shattering.

Kamal al-Yehyawī transforms into a hero driven by events rather than leading them; his relationships with characters are formed by pure chance, and the narration is shaped by the accumulation of scenes, decisions, and events driven by the secondary characters and their volatility and chaos. The narration, therefore, does not develop through decisive heroic decisions or a clearly defined conflict, but through the accumulation of scenes and experiences that intensify the condition of fragmentation and the internal collapse of the

⁴⁹ Al-Riyāhī, 2015, p. 44.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 26.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 80.

⁵² Ibid. p. 166.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 154.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 30.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 23.

⁵⁷ Al-Riyāhī, 2015, pp. 186–187.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 157.

⁵⁹ Al-Riyāhī, 2015, pp. 35.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 78.

hero, Kamal al-Yehyawī. Furthermore, the moral degradation from which the hero suffers reflects the failure of the social and cultural system to which he belongs; accordingly, the character of Kamal becomes an essential point of convergence between narrative disintegration and existential fragmentation, and between the collapse of the traditional novel structure and the collapse of the contemporary human being's image of himself. Added to the manifestations of the disintegration of the central character Kamal al-Yehyawī is the absence of any clear goal that could lend his actions even a minimum of meaning: he does not strive to achieve a specific aim, neither at the individual level, nor at the professional or human level, but rather lives in a constant state of internal chaos, where his actions proliferate as immediate reactions rather than clear choices. We might consider his detention of his outstanding students and his forcing them to write works that he publishes under his name for profit as an immediate goal that counters his inner emptiness: yet this goal does not spring from vision, conviction, or ambition, but from a consumerist and exploitative impulse governed by a desire for false gain, confirming the passivity of the central character, which in turn constitutes a passive hero, or anti-hero.

From this, the novel *Ashīqāt al-Nadhīl* embodies the radical transformation of the concept of the postmodern hero: the hero is no longer a center of meaning or a bearer of salvation, but a glaring sign of their erosion. The novel does not seek heroism; it deconstructs it. It does not glorify humanity; it reveals its fragility, its brokenness, and its loss in a cold, and an absurdist world.⁶¹

The Hero in *Layl Tanja*

The central character in the novel *Layl Tanja* is presented as a broken, disturbed self, incapable of expressing its inner depths, carrying a scattered consciousness devoid of

any social, religious, or political bonds. This appears from the very first page of the novel, as the hero addresses himself: "You mangy dog, concentrate, concentrate, I must breathe deeply, concentrate, cold, cold, cold, I must concentrate"⁶². The hero appears to be confused, disoriented, incapable of gathering the vomit of his thoughts⁶³ and bereft of self-worth. The novel begins with the scene of the hero's mother's death after her struggle with cancer resulting from the mustard gas Spain had dropped on the mountains of the countryside (al-Rif).⁶⁴ We then discover that his circle of relationships is very limited, comprising: his friend Idris who decided to take his own life, his friend Jawad who died of an unknown illness, his beloved Hamida who left him without warning, and his unfaithful wife Sara, as the hero's discovery of his infertility at the end of the novel explains his wife's betrayal of him, with his own father, reaching the apex of psychological disintegration and the violation of reality by the wretched situation of the hero as husband, son, and father.

At the level of broader social life, the hero works as a teacher in the village of Bab Burd, a teacher who has despaired of the failing education sector, which led him to request a forged certificate from a psychiatrist to grant him a full year of sick leave. The doctor then persuaded him to participate in an experiment to test a new American drug in exchange for ten thousand dirhams, and it became clear, after his agreement and a full month of taking the drug, that the experiment had been canceled, leaving the hero emptier and more embittered. Accordingly, he is a hero bereft of hope, defeated, living in absolute absurdity, thereby losing the most important pillars of traditional heroism: the ability to comprehend, organize, and make correct decisions. The hero's consciousness does not assist him in sound, coherent thinking; rather, it devours itself and

⁶¹ See: Bouzidi, 2023, p. 2496.

⁶² Ahjiouj, 2022, p. 7.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 75.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

erodes, and he is aware of this, saying: 'My brain has begun to eat itself.'

Although the desire for progress exists in the hero, it is fragile; the process of achieving goals is haphazard and faltering, unable to withstand the acute depression and constant disappointment that haunt him. Only one chapter of the novel is written, and he even mocks this dream, saying: 'My novel will be simple, completely comprehensible to the reader. Ha ha ha. Hahahaha.'⁶⁵ He was forced to sell cultural journal he founded with his two partners to pay his debts, for it was, in the hero's words, a reckless venture⁶⁶. He says: "We were full of hope. Damn it. D, a, a, a, a, m, n it. It was a false hope, and we were fools. Mere fools fighting windmills. Shshshshsh"⁶⁷ This is apart from his job as a teacher, which is taken from him because of his frequent absences. Accordingly, the central character in the novel cannot be classified as a hero, but rather as an anti-hero or a failed hero.

The hero's disarray and psychological tension are felt in the way he narrates the details of his life. We find fragmentation, repetition, and curses that reflect the fragmentation of his consciousness and the loss of his capacity for clear expression. The hero does not narrate the details of his day to us; he raves, screams, stutters, writes against the pen that accompanied him throughout the duration of the medical experiment to document what he felt, and against memory itself, memory itself becoming an enemy as a result of the successive traumas he lived. We see this clearly when he remembers Hamida, his beloved who left him without warning: her memory refuses to die and instead imposes its presence coercively; every time the hero feels incapable, oppressed, and wronged, he summons her memory. As for his national belonging, the hero declares his absolute hatred of the homeland and rejects it as a stifling, miserable space: "I

no longer want it as a homeland,"⁶⁸ he adds, "I hated my belonging to this wretched homeland,"⁶⁹ for Tangier, the city of night, is the city of nightmares, illicit intimate relations, and collective hypocrisy.

The narrator searches in vain for an outlet from his gloomy life; we sense his sluggish, chaotic movements, which expose his inner fluctuations and a scattered self amid the demolished political reality, the crumbling social institutions, and the self-lost between the world's falseness and life's futility. The hero describes his tense psychological state: "I close my eyes. I furrow my brow. I think. I try to remember. I have lost count. I don't know today's date. Perhaps it is the thirtieth of August. Perhaps it is the tenth of September."⁷⁰ He continues to confirm the deterioration of his psychological state, justifying his transformation into an exhausted human being: "I love autumn [...], but autumn is no longer autumn and solitude is no longer safe. The job came. Responsibilities grew heavy and multiplied, and Hamida entered my life to turn it upside down, then went as my mother had gone, and I remained alone, stretched on the bed, watching for what comes and does not come. I do nothing but turn thoughts over in my head. I do nothing but drown in the current of thoughts that takes me wherever it wishes."⁷¹

The writer Ahjiouj refrains from naming his fragmented hero, and perhaps in this lies a concentration of structural meaning, for the hero represents the homeland and the dispersed Arab consciousness. Meta, narration manifests in the novel and reveals the extent of the hero's disintegration in his attempt to write a novel; his statement, *'I am the novel,'* dissolves the boundary between the hero and the text, between the self and the narration. In his attempt to write a novel, he proposes different backgrounds for his novel's hero; in

⁶⁵ Ahjiouj, 2022, p. 76.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 134.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 81.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 121.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 119.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 19.

one of them, he makes his hero a soldier returning to Tangier after five years of absence, finding it a city utterly different from what he had known: "The soldier will discover during his journey a frightening world of sexual secrets in the city. He will discover the hypocrisy of society and will be unable to endure all that filth. I will make him, the first thing he does when he returns home, throw himself from the top of the roof. No. No, no. Before that, I will make him write a novel, [...] the novel will speak of a novelist suffering bitterly in a backward society because he wrote a novel that presents a proposal to save society from prostitution and the spread of rape cases, sexual diseases, and unmarried mothers. The proposal is the legal recognition of the profession of sex workers."⁷² We may infer from this that the hero of *Layl Tanja* is indeed this returning soldier, thrashing between the nightmares of war and the anxiety of losing homeland and human being, and if this hypothesis is correct, the hero takes his own life after he himself has written a novel about the collective and individual tragedy of the homeland.

Tracing the hero's character in *Layl Tanja*, in light of the concept of the fragmented hero, indicates that this character does not emerge as an active figure but is a problematic self that erodes from within, gradually losing its capacity for action, organization, and decision-making. The absence of a name, the stumbling of goals, and failure to achieve them are structural indicators of the deviation of heroism from the center of action to the margin of existence. Accordingly, the novel does not produce a traditional hero. Still, it radically represents the concept of the hero through the anti-hero, who serves as a cognitive instrument for understanding the collapse of meaning.

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⁷² Ahjiouj, 2022, p. 135.

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